

# Greenlandic language

**Greenlandic** (Danish: *grønlandsk*; Greenlandic: *kalaallisut*) is an Eskimo–Aleut language with about 57,000 speakers,<sup>[4]</sup> mostly Greenlandic Inuit people in Greenland. It is closely related to the Inuit languages in Canada, such as Inuktitut. The main variety, Kalaallisut, or West Greenlandic, has been the official language of the Greenlandic autonomous territory since June 2009; this is a move by the Naalakkersuisut (government of Greenland) to strengthen the language in its competition with the colonial language, Danish. The second variety is Tunumiit oraasiat, or East Greenlandic. The language of the Thule Inuit of Greenland, Inukturn or Polar Eskimo, is a recent arrival and a dialect of Inuktitut.

Greenlandic is a polysynthetic language that allows the creation of long words by stringing together roots and suffixes. Its morphosyntactic alignment is ergative, meaning that it treats (i.e. case-marks) the argument ("subject") of an intransitive verb like the object of a transitive verb, but distinctly from the agent ("subject") of a transitive verb.

Nouns are inflected for one of the eight cases and for possession. Verbs are inflected for one of the eight moods and for the number and person of its subject and object. Both nouns and verbs have complex derivational morphology. Basic word order in transitive clauses is subject–object–verb. Subordination of clauses is done by the use of special subordinate moods. A so-called fourth-person category enables switch-reference between main clauses and subordinate clauses with different subjects. Greenlandic is notable for its lack of a system of grammatical tense, as temporal relations are normally expressed through context, through the use of temporal particles such as "yesterday" or "now" or sometimes through the use of derivational suffixes or the combination of affixes with aspectual meanings with the semantic aktionsart of different verbs. However, some linguists have suggested that Greenlandic does mark future tense obligatorily. Another question is whether the language has noun incorporation, or whether the processes that create complex predicates that include nominal roots are derivational in nature.

When adopting new concepts or technologies, Greenlandic usually constructs new words made from Greenlandic roots, but modern Greenlandic has also taken many loans from Danish and English. The language has been written in the Latin script since Danish colonization began in the 1700s. The first orthography was developed by Samuel Kleinschmidt in 1851, but within a hundred years already differed substantially from the spoken language because of a number of sound

Greenlandic	
Danish: <i>grønlandsk</i>	
<i>kalaallisut</i>	
<span></span> <div>Sign in Greenlandic and Danish</div>	
Native to	Greenland
Region	Greenland, Denmark
Ethnicity	Greenlandic Inuit
Native speakers	57,000 <sup>[1]</sup>
Language family	<div>Eskimo–Aleut<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Eskimo-Aleut<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Inuit<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Greenlandic</b></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></div>
Dialects	Kalaallisut <p>Tunumiisut</p> <p>Inukturn</p>
Writing system	Latin <p>Scandinavian</p> <p>Braille</p>
Official status	
Official language in	<span><span></span></span> Greenland <sup>[2]</sup>
Recognised minority language in	<span><span></span></span> Denmark
Regulated by	The Greenland Language Secretariat <p>Oqaasileriffik (<a href="http://www.oqaasileriffik.gl/en">http://www.oqaasileriffik.gl/en</a>)</p>
Language codes	
ISO 639-1	kl ( <a href="https://www.loc.gov/standard">https://www.loc.gov/standard</a> )

changes. An extensive orthographic reform undertaken in 1973 that made the script easier to learn resulted in a boost in Greenlandic literacy, which is now among the highest in the world.

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	<a href="https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?iso_639_1=k1">s/iso639-2/php/1angcodes_name.php?iso_639_1=k1</a> )
ISO 639-2	kal ( <a href="https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=222">https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=222</a> )
ISO 639-3	kal
Glottolog	<i>None</i> kala1399 ( <a href="http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/kala1399">http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/kala1399</a> ) <sup>[3]</sup>
	

Before June 2009, Greenlandic shared its status as the official language in Greenland with Danish.<sup>[note 1]</sup> Since then, Greenlandic has become the sole official language.<sup>[2]</sup> This has made Greenlandic a unique example of an indigenous language of the Americas that is recognized by law as the only official language of a semi-independent country. Nevertheless, it is still considered to be in a "vulnerable" state by the



Illustration 1: Distribution of Inuit language variants across the Arctic.

UNESCO Red Book of Language Endangerment.<sup>[10]</sup> The country has a 100% literacy rate.<sup>[11]</sup> As the Western Greenlandic standard has become dominant, a UNESCO report has labelled the other dialects as endangered, and measures are now being considered to protect the Eastern Greenlandic dialect.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Classification

Kalaallisut and the other Greenlandic dialects belong to the Eskimo–Aleut family and are closely related to the Inuit languages of Canada and Alaska. Illustration 1 shows the locations of the different Eskimoan languages, among them the three main dialects of Greenlandic.

The most prominent Greenlandic dialect is Kalaallisut, which is the official language of Greenland. The name *Kalaallisut* is often used as a cover term for all of Greenlandic. The northern dialect, *Inuktun* (*Avanersuarmitut*), spoken in the vicinity of the city of Qaanaaq (Thule), is particularly closely related to Canadian Inuktitut. The eastern dialect (*Tunumiit oraasiat*), spoken in the vicinity of Ammassalik Island and Ittoqqortoormiit, is the most innovative of the Greenlandic dialects, having assimilated consonant clusters and vowel sequences to a greater extent than West Greenlandic.<sup>[15]</sup> Kalaallisut is further divided into four subdialects. One that is spoken around Upernavik has certain similarities to East Greenlandic, possibly because of a previous migration from eastern Greenland. A second dialect is spoken in the region of Uummannaq and the Disko Bay. The standard language is based on the central Kalaallisut dialect spoken in Sisimiut in the north, around Nuuk and as far south as Maniitsoq. Southern Kalaallisut is spoken around Narsaq and Qaqortoq in the south.<sup>[5]</sup> Table 1 shows the differences in the pronunciation of the word for "humans" in the three main dialects. It can be seen that Inuktun is the most conservative, maintaining the "gh" which has been elided in Kalaallisut, and Tunumiisut is the most innovative, having further simplified the structure by eliding the /n/.

Example of differences between the 3 main dialects

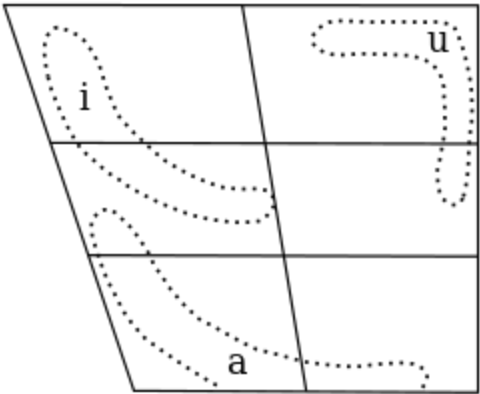
English	Kalaallisut	Inuktun	Tunumiisut
humans	<i>inuit</i>	<i>inughuit</i> <sup>[13]</sup>	<i>iivit</i> <sup>[14]</sup>

## Phonology

Letters between slashes / / indicate phonemic transcription, letters in square brackets [ ] indicate phonetic transcription and letters in triangular brackets < > indicate standard Greenlandic orthography.

### Vowels

The Greenlandic three vowel system, composed of /i/, /u/, and /a/, is typical for an Eskimo–Aleut language. Double vowels are analyzed as two morae, so they are phonologically a vowel sequence and not a long vowel; they are also written as two vowels in the orthography.<sup>[17][18]</sup> The only diphthong in the language is /ai/, which occurs only at the ends of words.<sup>[19]</sup> Before a uvular consonant ([q] or [ɣ]), /i/ is realized allophonically as [e], [ɛ] or [ɐ], and /u/ is realized allophonically as [o] or [ɔ], and the two vowels are written *e*, *o* respectively (as in some orthographies used for Quechua and Aymara).<sup>[20]</sup> /a/ becomes retracted to [ɑ] in the same environment. /i/ is rounded to [y] before labial consonants.<sup>[20]</sup> /u/ is fronted to [ʉ] between two coronal consonants.<sup>[20]</sup>



Ranges of West Greenlandic monophthongs on a vowel chart.<sup>[16]</sup>

The allophonic lowering of /i/ and /u/ before uvular consonants is shown in the modern orthography by writing /i/ and /u/ as ⟨e⟩ and ⟨o⟩ respectively before uvulars ⟨q⟩ and ⟨r⟩. For example:

/ui/ "husband" pronounced [ui].

/uiqarpuq/ "(s)he has a husband" pronounced [ueqɑɐpɔq] and written ⟨ueqarpoq⟩.

/illu/ "house" pronounced [iɬ : u].

/illuqarpuq/ "(s)he has a house" pronounced [iɬ : oqɑɐpɔq] and written ⟨illoqarpoq⟩.

## Consonants

Greenlandic has consonants at five points of articulation: labial, alveolar, palatal, velar and uvular. It distinguishes stops, fricatives, and nasals at the labial, alveolar, velar, and uvular points of articulation.<sup>[note 2]</sup> The earlier palatal sibilant [ʃ] has merged with [s] in all but a few dialects.<sup>[21]</sup> The labiodental fricative [f] is only contrastive in loanwords. The alveolar stop [t] is pronounced as an affricate [t͡s] before the high front vowel /i/. Often, Danish loanwords containing ⟨b d g⟩ preserve these in writing, although this does not imply a change in pronunciation, for example ⟨baaja⟩ [pa : ja] "beer" and ⟨Guuti⟩ [ku : t̪ i] "God"; these are pronounced exactly as /p t k/.<sup>[5]</sup>

### 2. Consonants of Kalaallisut

	<u>Labial</u>	<u>Alveolar</u>	<u>Palatal</u>	<u>Velar</u>	<u>Uvular</u>
<u>Stops</u>	/p/ ⟨p⟩	/t/ ⟨t⟩		/k/ ⟨k⟩	/q/ ⟨q⟩
<u>Fricatives</u>	/v/ ⟨v⟩ <sup>[note 3]</sup>	/s/ ⟨s⟩	(/ʃ/) <sup>[note 4]</sup>	/ɣ/ ⟨g⟩	/ʁ/ ⟨r⟩
<u>Nasals</u>	/m/ ⟨m⟩	/n/ ⟨n⟩		/ŋ/ ⟨ng⟩	/ɴ/ ⟨rn⟩
<u>Liquids</u>		/l/ ⟨l⟩ ~ [ɬ] ⟨ll⟩			
<u>Semivowel</u>			/j/ ⟨j⟩		

## Phonotactics

The Kalaallisut syllable is simple, allowing syllables of (C)(V)V(C), where C is a consonant and V is a vowel and VV is a double vowel or word-final /ai/.<sup>[22]</sup> Native words may only begin with a vowel or /p, t, k, q, s, m, n/; they may end only in a vowel or /p, t, k, q/ or rarely /n/. Consonant clusters only occur over syllable boundaries and their pronunciation is subject to regressive assimilations that convert them into geminates. All non-nasal consonants in a cluster are voiceless.<sup>[23]</sup>

## Prosody

Greenlandic prosody does not include stress as an autonomous category; instead, prosody is determined by tonal and durational parameters.<sup>[18]</sup> Intonation is influenced by syllable weight: heavy syllables are pronounced in a way that may be perceived as stress. Heavy syllables include syllables with long vowels and syllables before consonant clusters. The last syllable is stressed in words with fewer than four syllables and without long vowels or consonant clusters. The antepenultimate syllable is stressed in words with more than four syllables that are all light. In words with many heavy syllables, syllables with long vowels are considered heavier than syllables before a consonant cluster.<sup>[24]</sup>

Geminate consonants are pronounced long, almost exactly with the double duration of a single consonant.<sup>[25]</sup>

Intonation in indicative clauses usually rises on the antepenultimate syllable, falls on the penult and rises on the last syllable. Interrogative intonation rises on the penultimate and falls on the last syllable.<sup>[24][26]</sup>

## Morphophonology

Greenlandic phonology distinguishes itself phonologically from the other Inuit languages by a series of assimilations.

Greenlandic phonology allows clusters, but it does not allow clusters of two different consonants unless the first one is /ɸ/. In all other cases the first consonant in a cluster is assimilated to the second one resulting in a geminate consonant. Geminate /tt/ is pronounced [ts] and written ⟨ts⟩. Geminate /ll/ is pronounced [ɭ : ]. Geminate /ʁʁ/ is pronounced [ç : ] but is written ⟨gg⟩. Geminate /ɸɸ/ is pronounced [χ : ]. Geminate /vv/ is pronounced [f : ] and written ⟨ff⟩. /v/ is also pronounced and written [f] after /ɸ/.<sup>[27]</sup>

These assimilations mean that one of the most recognizable Inuktitut words, *iglu* ("house"), is *illu* in Greenlandic, where the /gl/ consonant cluster of Inuktitut is assimilated into a voiceless alveolar lateral fricative. And the word *Inuktitut* itself, when translated into Kalaallisut, becomes *Inuttut*. The Old Greenlandic diphthong /au/ has assimilated to /aa/.

The consonant /v/ has disappeared when between /u/ and /i/ or /a/. This means that affixes beginning with -va or -vi have forms without [v] when suffixed to stems ending in /u/.

The vowel /i/ of modern Greenlandic is the result of a historic merger of the Proto-Eskimo–Aleut vowels \*i and \*ɪ. The fourth vowel was still present in Old Greenlandic as attested by Hans Egede.<sup>[28]</sup> In modern West Greenlandic the difference between the two original vowels can only be discerned morphophonologically in certain environments. The vowel that was originally \*ɪ has the variant [a] when preceding another vowel and sometimes disappears before certain suffixes.<sup>[29]</sup>

The degree to which the assimilation of consonant clusters has taken place is an important dialectal feature separating Polar Eskimo, *Inukturn*, which still allows some ungeminated consonant clusters, from West and East Greenlandic. East Greenlandic (*Tunumiit oraasiat*) has shifted some geminate consonants, e.g. [ɭ : ] to [t : ]. Thus, for example, the East Greenlandic name of a particular town is *Ittoqqortoormiit*, which would appear as *Illoqqortoormiut* in Kalaallisut.<sup>[14][15]</sup>

## Grammar

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The morphology of Greenlandic is highly synthetic and exclusively suffixing,<sup>[30]</sup> with the exception of a single highly limited and fossilized demonstrative prefix. It creates very long words by means of adding strings of suffixes to a stem.<sup>[note 5]</sup> In principle there is no limit to the length of a Greenlandic word, but in practice words with more than half a dozen derivational suffixes are not so frequent, and the average number of morphemes per word is 3 to 5.<sup>[31][note 6]</sup> The language employs around 318 inflectional suffixes and between four hundred and five hundred derivational ones.<sup>[32]</sup>

There are few compound words, but lots of derivations.<sup>[33]</sup> The grammar employs a mixture of head and dependent marking: both agent and patient are marked on the predicate and the possessor is marked on nouns, while dependent noun phrases inflect for case. The primary morphosyntactic alignment of full noun phrases in Kalaallisut is ergative-absolutive, although verbal morphology follows a nominative-accusative pattern and pronouns are syntactically neutral.

The language distinguishes four persons (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th or 3rd reflexive (see Obviation and switch-reference), two numbers (singular and plural; no dual as in Inuktitut), eight moods (indicative, interrogative, imperative, optative, conditional, causative, contemporative and participial) and eight cases (absolutive, ergative, equative, instrumental, locative, allative, ablative and prolativ). Verbs carry a bipersonal inflection for subject and object. Possessive noun phrases inflect for their possessor, as well as for case.<sup>[34]</sup>

In this section the examples are written in Greenlandic standard orthography except that morpheme boundaries are indicated by a hyphen.



A bilingual sign in Nuuk, showing the contrast between Danish and Kalaallisut. The sign translates to "parking forbidden for all vehicles".

## Syntax

Greenlandic distinguishes three open word classes: nouns, verbs and particles. Verbs inflect for person and number of subject and object as well as for mood. Nouns inflect for possession and for case. Particles do not inflect.<sup>[35]</sup>

	Verb	Noun	Particle
<b>Word</b>	<i>Oqar-poq</i> "he says"	<i>Angut</i> "A man"	<i>Naamik</i> "No"
<b>Gloss</b>	say-3p/IND <sup>[note 7]</sup>	man.ABS	No

The verb is the only word required to build a sentence. Since verbs inflect for number and person of both subject and object, the verb is in fact a clause itself. Therefore, clauses where all participants are expressed as free-standing noun phrases are rather rare.<sup>[35]</sup> The following examples show the possibilities of leaving out these verbal arguments:

Intransitive clause with no subject noun phrase:

*Sini-ppoq* "(S)he sleeps"  
sleep-3p/IND<sup>[note 8]</sup>

Intransitive clause with subject noun phrase:

*Angu-t sinippoq* "the man sleeps"  
man.ABS sleep-3p/IND

Transitive clause with no overt arguments:

*Asa-vaa* "(S)he loves him/her/it"  
love-3p/3p

Transitive clause with agent noun phrase:

*Angut-ip asa-vaa* "the man loves him/her/it"  
man-ERG love-3p/3p

Transitive clause with patient noun phrase:

*Arnaq asa-vaa* "(S)he loves the woman"  
woman.ABS love-3p/3p

## Morphosyntactic alignment

The Greenlandic language uses case to express grammatical relations between participants in a sentence. Nouns are inflected with one of the two core cases or one of the six oblique cases.<sup>[36]</sup>

Greenlandic is an ergative language. This means that, instead of treating the grammatical relations as in most European languages where grammatical subjects are marked with nominative case and objects with accusative, the grammatical roles are defined differently. In Greenlandic the ergative case is used for agents of transitive verbs and for possessors. Absolutive case is used for patients of transitive verbs and subjects of intransitive verbs.<sup>[37]</sup> Research into Greenlandic as used by the younger generation has shown that the use of ergative alignment in Kalaallisut may be becoming obsolete, converting the language into a nominative–accusative language.<sup>[38]</sup>

Intransitive:

*Anda sini-ppoq* "Anda sleeps"  
Anda.ABS sleep-3p/IND

Transitive with agent and object:

*Anda-p nanoq taku-aa* "Anda sees a bear"  
Anda-ERG bear.ABS see-3p/3p

## Word order

In transitive clauses where both object and subject are expressed as free noun phrases, basic, pragmatically neutral word order is AOXV / SXV, where X is a noun phrase in one of the oblique cases. This order is fairly free, though. Topical noun phrases occur at the beginning of a clause whereas new or emphasized information generally come last. This is usually the verb, but it can also be a focal subject or object as well. In spoken language also "afterthought" material or clarifications may follow the verb, usually in a lowered pitch.<sup>[39]</sup>

On the other hand, the noun phrase is characterized by a rigid order where the head of the phrase precedes any modifiers and the possessor precedes the possessum.<sup>[40]</sup>

In copula clauses the order is usually Subject-Copula-Complement.

*Andap tujuuluk pisiaraa* "Anda bought the sweater"  
Anda sweater bought  
A O V

An attribute appears after its head noun.

*Andap tujuuluk tungujortoq pisiaraa* "Anda bought the blue sweater"  
Anda sweater blue bought  
A O X V

An attribute of an incorporated noun appears after the verb:



*Anda sanasuuvoq pikkorissoq* "Anda is a skilled carpenter"  
Anda carpenter.IS skilled  
S V APP

## Coordination and subordination

Syntactic coordination and subordination is done by combining predicates in the superordinate moods (indicative, interrogative, imperative, optative) with predicates in the subordinate moods (conditional, causative, contemporative and participial). The contemporative has both coordinative and subordinative functions depending on context.<sup>[41]</sup> The relative order of the main clause and its coordinate or subordinate clauses is relatively free, and mostly subject to pragmatic concerns.<sup>[42]</sup>

## Obviation and switch-reference

The Greenlandic pronominal system includes a distinction known as obviation<sup>[43]</sup> or switch-reference.<sup>[44]</sup> There is a special so-called fourth person<sup>[45]</sup> used to denote a third person subject of a subordinate verb or the possessor of a noun that is coreferent with the third person subject of the matrix clause.<sup>[46]</sup> Below are examples of the difference between third and fourth person:

*illu-a taku-aa* "he saw his (the other man's) house"  
house-3<sub>POSS</sub> see-3p/3p

*illu-ni taku-aa* "he saw his own house"  
house-4<sub>POSS</sub> see-3p/3p

*Ole oqar-poq tillu-kkiga* "Ole said I had hit him (the other man)"  
Ole say-3p hit-I/3p

*Ole oqar-poq tillu-kkini* "Ole said I had hit him (Ole)"  
Ole say-3p hit-I/4p<sup>[note 9]</sup>

*Eva iser-uni sini-ssaa-q* "When Eva comes in she'll sleep"  
Eva come.in-4p sleep-expect-3p

*Eva iser-pat sini-ssaa-q* When Eva comes in (s)he'll sleep (someone else).  
Eva come.in-3p sleep-expect-3p

## Indefiniteness construction

There is no category of definiteness in Greenlandic, so the information whether participants are already known to the listener or new in the discourse is encoded by other means. According to some authors, morphology related to transitivity such as the use of the construction sometimes called antipassive<sup>[47][48]</sup> or intransitive object<sup>[49]</sup> conveys such meaning, along with strategies of noun incorporation of non-topical noun phrases.<sup>[50][51]</sup> This view, however, is controversial.<sup>[52]</sup>

Active:

*Piitap arfeq takuaa* "Peter saw the whale"  
Peter-ERG whale see

Antipassive/intransitive object:

*Piitaaq arfermik takuvoq* "Peter saw (a) whale"

## Verbs

The morphology of Greenlandic verbs is enormously complex. The two main processes are inflection and derivation. Inflectional morphology includes the processes of obligatory inflection for mood, person, and voice (tense/aspect is not an inflectional category in Kalaallisut).<sup>[53][54][55]</sup> Derivational morphology modifies the meaning of verbs in a way similar to that expressed by adverbs in English. Derivational suffixes of this kind number in the hundreds. Many of these suffixes are so semantically salient that they are often referred to as postbases rather than suffixes, particularly in the American tradition of Eskimo grammar.<sup>[56]</sup> Such semantically "heavy" suffixes may express concepts such as "to have", "to be", "to say", or "to think". The Greenlandic verb word consists of a root + derivational suffixes/postbases + inflectional suffixes. Tense and aspect is marked by optional suffixes that appear between the derivational and inflectional suffixes.

## Inflection

Greenlandic verbs inflect for agreement with agent and patient, for mood and for voice. There are eight moods, of which four are used in independent clauses and four in subordinate clauses. The four independent moods are: indicative, interrogative, imperative, optative. The four dependent moods are causative, conditional, contemporative, and participial. Verbal roots can take transitive, intransitive or negative inflections, so that all eight mood suffixes have these three forms.<sup>[57]</sup> The inflectional system is further complicated by the fact that transitive suffixes encode both agent and patient in a single morpheme, requiring up to 48 different suffixes to cover all possible combinations of agent and patient for each of the eight transitive paradigms. As some moods do not have forms for all persons (imperative only has 2nd person, optative only 1st and 3rd person, participial mood has no 4th person and contemporative has no 3rd person), the total number of verbal inflectional suffixes is about 318.<sup>[58]</sup>

## Indicative and interrogative moods

The indicative mood is used in all independent expository clauses. The interrogative mood is used for posing questions. Questions with the question particle *immaqa* "maybe" cannot use the interrogative mood.<sup>[59]</sup>

*napparsima-vit?* "Are you sick?" (interrogative mood)  
be.sick-YOU/INTERR

*naamik, napparsima-nngila-nga.* "No, I am not sick" (indicative mood)  
no, be.sick-NEG-I/IND

Table 5 shows the intransitive indicative inflection for patient person and number of the verb *neri*- "to eat" in the indicative and interrogative moods (question marks mark interrogative intonation—questions have falling intonation on the last syllable as opposed to most Indo-European languages in which questions are marked by rising intonation). The indicative and the interrogative mood each have a transitive and an intransitive inflection, but here only the intransitive inflection is given. Consonant gradation like that in Finnish appears to show up in the verb conjugation (with strengthening to *pp* in the 3rd person plural and weakening to *v* elsewhere).

## 5. Indicative and interrogative intransitive moods

indicative	interrogative
<i>nerivunga</i> "I am eating"	<i>nerivunga?</i> "Am I eating?"
<i>nerivutit</i> "You are eating"	<i>nerivit?</i> "Are you eating?"
<i>nerivoq</i> "He/she/it eats"	<i>neriva?</i> "Is he/she/it eating?"
<i>nerivugut</i> "We are eating"	<i>nerivugut?</i> "Are we eating?"
<i>nerivusi</i> "You are eating (pl.)"	<i>nerivisi?</i> "Are you eating? (pl.)"
<i>neripput</i> "They are eating"	<i>nerippat?</i> "Are they eating?"

Table 6 shows the transitive indicative inflection for patient person and number of the verb *asa-* "to love" (an asterisk means that this form does not occur as such but would have to use a different reflexive inflection).

## 6. Transitive indicative mood

First person subject	Second person subject	Third person subject
*	<i>asavarma</i> "You love me"	<i>asavaanga</i> "He/she/it loves me"
<i>asavakkit</i> "I love you"	*	<i>asavaatit</i> "He/she/it loves you"
<i>asavara</i> "I love him/her/it"	<i>asavat</i> "You love her/him/it"	<i>asavaa</i> "He/she/it loves him/her/it"
*	<i>asavatsigut</i> "You love us"	<i>asavaatigut</i> "He/she/it loves us"
<i>asavassi</i> "I love you (pl.)"	*	<i>asavaasi</i> "He/she/it loves you (pl.)"
<i>asavakka</i> "I love them"	<i>asavatit</i> "You love them"	<i>asavai</i> "He/she/it loves them"

## Imperative and optative moods

The imperative mood is used to issue orders. It is always combined with the second person. The optative is used to express wishes or exhortations and is never used with the second person. There is a negative imperative form used to issue prohibitions. Both optative and imperative have transitive and intransitive paradigms. There are two transitive positive imperative paradigms: a standard one, and one that is considered rude and is usually used to address children.<sup>[60]</sup>

*sini-git!* "Sleep!"  
sleep-IMP

*sini-llanga* "Let me sleep!"  
sleep-1p.OPT

*sini-nnak!* "Don't sleep!"  
sleep-NEG.IMP

## Conditional mood

The conditional mood is used to construct subordinate clauses with the meaning "if" or "when".<sup>[61]</sup>

*seqinner-pat Eva ani-ssaa-q* "If the sun shines, Eva will go out"  
Sunshine-COND Eva go.out-expect/3p

## Causative mood

The causative mood (sometimes called the *conjunctive*) is used to construct subordinate clauses with the meaning "because", "since" or "when"; it is also sometimes used with the meaning of "that". The causative is also used in main clauses to imply some underlying cause.<sup>[62]</sup>

*qasu-gami innar-poq* "He went to bed because he was tired"  
be.tired-CAU/3p go.to.bed-3p

*matta-ttor-ama* "I've eaten blubber (that's why I'm not hungry)"  
blubber-eat-CAU/I

*ani-guit eqqaama-ssa-vat teriannia-qar-mat* "If you go out, remember that there are foxes"  
go.out-COND/YOU remember-fut-IMP fox-are-CAUS

## Contemporative mood

The contemporative mood is used to construct subordinate clauses with the meaning of simultaneity. It is only used if the subject of the subordinate clause and of the main clause are identical. If they differ, the participial mood or causative mood are used. The contemporative can also be used to form complement clauses for verbs of speaking or thinking.<sup>[63]</sup>

*qasu-llunga angerlar-punga* "Being tired, I went home"  
be.tired-CONT.I go.home-I

*98-inik ukio-qar-luni toqu-voq* "Being 98 years old, he/she died", "he/she was 98 when he/she died"  
98-INSTR.PL year-have-CONT.4p.SG die-3p

*Eva oqar-poq kami-it akiler-lugit* "Eva said she had paid for the boots"  
Eva say-3p boot-PL pay-CONT.3p.PL

## Participial mood

The participial mood is used to construct a subordinate clause describing its subject in the state of carrying out an activity. It is used when the matrix clause and the subordinate clause have different subjects. It is often used in appositional phrases such as relative clauses.<sup>[64]</sup>

*atuar-toq taku-ara* "I saw her read/I saw that she read"  
read-PART/3p see-I/3p

*neriu-ppunga tiki-ssa-soq* "I hope he is coming/I hope he'll come"  
hope-I come-expect-PART/3p

## Derivation

Verbal derivation is extremely productive, and Greenlandic employs many hundreds of derivational suffixes. Often a single verb will use more than one derivational suffix, resulting in very long words. Below are given some examples of how derivational suffixes can change the meaning of verbs.

*-katak-* "be tired of"

*taku-katap-para* "I am tired of seeing it/him/her"  
see-tired.of-I/3p

-*ler*- "begin to/be about to"

*neri-ler-pugut* "We are about to eat"  
eat-begin-WE

-*llaqqik*- "be proficient at"

*erinar-su-llaqqip-poq* "She is good at singing"  
sing-HAB-proficiently-3p

-*niar*- "plans to/wants to"

*aallar-niar-poq* "He plans to travel"  
travel-plan-3p

*angerlar-niar-aluar-punga* "I was planning to go home though"  
go.home-plan-though-I

-*ngajak*- "almost"

*sini-ngajak-punga* "I had almost fallen asleep"  
sleep-almost-I

-*nikuu-nngila*- "has never"

*taku-nikuu-nngila-ra* "I have never seen it"  
see-never-NEG-I/3p

-*nngitsoor*- "not anyway/afterall"

*tiki-nngitsoor-poq* "He hasn't arrived after all"  
arrive-not.afterall-3p

## Time reference and aspect

Greenlandic grammar has morphological devices to mark a distinction between, for example, recent and distant past, but the use of these is not obligatory,<sup>[65]</sup> and they should therefore rather be understood as parts of Greenlandic's extensive derivational system than as a system of tense markers. Rather than by morphological marking, fixed temporal distance is expressed by temporal adverbials:<sup>[66]</sup>

*toqo-riikatap-poq* "He died long ago"<sup>[67]</sup>  
die-long.ago-3p/IND

*nere-qqammer-punga* "I ate recently"<sup>[67]</sup>  
eat-recently-I/IND

*ippassaq Piitaa arpap-poq* "Yesterday Peter was running."<sup>[68]</sup>  
yesterday Peter-ABS run-3p/IND

All other things being equal and in the absence of any explicit adverbials, the indicative mood will be interpreted as complete or incomplete depending on the verbal aktionsart.<sup>[68]</sup>

*Piitaa arpap-poq* "Peter runs"<sup>[68]</sup>  
Peter-ABS run-3p/IND  
*Piitaa ani-voq* "Peter was gone out"<sup>[68]</sup>  
Peter-ABS go.out-3p/IND

But if a sentence containing an atelic verbal phrase is embedded within the context of a past time narrative, it would be interpreted as past.<sup>[69]</sup>

Greenlandic has several purely derivational devices of expressing meaning related to aspect and aktionsart, e.g. *sar* expressing "habituality" and *ssaar* expressing "stop to".<sup>[70]</sup> Next to these, there are at least two major perfect markers: *sima* and *nikuu*. *sima* can occur in several positions with obviously different function<sup>[71]</sup> Rightmost position indicates evidential meaning, but this can be determined only if a number of suffixes are present.

*tiki(k)-nikuu-sima-voq* "Apparently, she had arrived"<sup>[72]</sup>  
arrive-NIKUU-SIMA-3p/INT

With atelic verbs, there is a regular contrast between indirective evidentiality marked by *sima* and witnessed evidentiality marked by *nikuu*.<sup>[73]</sup> Due to its evidential meaning, the combination of first person and *sima* sometimes is marked.<sup>[74]</sup>

*qia-sima-voq* "He cried (his eyes are swollen)"  
cry-SIMA-3p/IND  
*qia-nikuu-voq* "He cried (I was there)"  
cry-NIKUU-3p/IND<sup>[73]</sup>

In the written language<sup>[67]</sup> and more recently also in the spoken language especially of younger speakers, *sima* and *nikuu* can be used together with adverbials referring to a particular time in the past.<sup>[75]</sup> That is, they might arguably mark time reference, but not yet systematically.

Just as Greenlandic does not systematically mark past tense, the language also does not have a future tense. Rather, it employs three different strategies to express future meaning:

- suffixes denoting cognitive states that show an attitude about prospective actions.

e.g. *Ilimaga-ara aasaq manna Dudley qujanar-tor-si-ffigi-ssa-llugu* "I expect to get some fun out of Dudley this summer."

expect-I/3p/IND summer this Dudley be.fun-cn-get.from-expect-CONTEMPORATIVE/3p

- inchoative suffixes creating telic actions which can then be understood as already having begun by virtue of the indicative mood.

e.g. *Aggiuti-ler-para* "I've started to bring him."

bring-begin-I/3p/IND

- moods that mark the speech act as a request or wish.<sup>[76]</sup>

e.g. *Qimmii-t nerisi(k)-tigít* "Let us feed the dogs, ok?"<sup>[77]</sup>

dog-PL feed-please-we/them/IMP

While the status of the perfect markers as aspect is not very controversial, some scholars have claimed that Greenlandic has a basic temporal distinction between future and nonfuture. Especially, the suffix *-ssa* and handful of other suffixes have been claimed to be obligatory future markers.<sup>[78][79]</sup> However, at least for literary Greenlandic, these suffixes have been shown to have other semantics that can be used to refer to the future via the strategies just described.<sup>[80]</sup>

## Noun incorporation

There is also a debate in the linguistic literature whether Greenlandic has noun incorporation. This is because Greenlandic does not allow the kind of incorporation common in many languages in which a noun root can be incorporated into almost any verb to form a verb with a new meaning. On the other hand, Greenlandic does often form verbs that include noun roots. The question then becomes whether to analyse these verb formations as incorporation or as denominal derivation of verbs. Greenlandic has a number of morphemes that require a noun root as their host and which form complex predicates that correspond closely in meaning to what is often seen in languages that have canonical noun incorporation. Linguists who propose that Greenlandic does have incorporation argue that these morphemes are in fact verbal roots that must obligatorily incorporate nouns to form grammatical clauses.<sup>[48][81][82][83][84][85]</sup> This argument is supported by the fact that many of the derivational morphemes that form denominal verbs work almost identically to canonical noun incorporation. They allow the formation of words with a semantic content corresponding to an entire English clause with verb, subject and object. Another argument is that the morphemes used to derive denominal verbs come from historical noun incorporating constructions that have become fossilized.<sup>[86]</sup> Other linguists maintain that the morphemes in question are simply derivational morphemes that allow the formation of denominal verbs. This argument is supported by the fact that the morphemes cannot occur without being latched on to a nominal element.<sup>[87][88][89]</sup> The examples below illustrate how Greenlandic forms complex predicates including nominal roots.

*qimmeq* "dog" + *-qar-* "have" (+ *-poq* "3p")

*qimme-qar-poq* "She has a dog"

*illu* "house" + *-lior-* "make"

*illu-lior-poq* "She builds a house"

*kaffi* "coffee" + *-sor-* "drink/eat"

*kaffi-sor-poq* "She drinks coffee"

*puisi* "seal" + *-nniar-* "hunt"

*puisi-nniar-poq* "She hunts seal"

*allagaq* "letter" + *-si-* "receive"

*allagar-si-voq* "She has received a letter"

*anaana* "mother" + *-a-* "to be"

*anaana-a-voq* "She is a mother"

## Nouns

Nouns are obligatorily inflected for case and number and optionally for number and person of possessor. Singular and plural are distinguished and 8 cases used: absolutive, ergative (relative), instrumental, allative, locative, ablative, prosecutive (also called vialis or prolative), and equative.<sup>[90]</sup> Case and number are marked by a single suffix. Nouns can be derived from verbs or from other nouns by a number of suffixes, e.g. *atuar-* "to read" + *-fik* "place" becomes *atuarfik* "school" and *atuarfik* + *-tsialak* "something good" becomes *atuarfitsialak* "good school".

The fact that the possessive agreement suffixes on nouns and the transitive agreement suffixes on verbs in a number of instances have similar or identical shapes has even resulted in the theory that Greenlandic has a distinction between transitive and intransitive nouns, parallel to the same distinction in the verbs.<sup>[91][note 10]</sup>

## Pronouns

There are personal pronouns for first-, second-, and third-person singular and plural. These pronouns are optional as subjects or objects, but only when the verbal inflection refers to such arguments.<sup>[92]</sup>

Personal pronouns

	Singular	Plural
First person	uanga	uagut
Second person	illit	ilissi
Third person	una	uku

Personal pronouns are, however, necessary in the oblique case:

illit nere-qu-aatit  
 you. eat tell-to 3s-2s-indic.  
 'He told you to eat'

## Case

The two grammatical core cases ergative and absolutive are used to express grammatical and syntactical roles of participant noun phrases. The oblique cases express information related to movement and manner.

*angu-t neri-voq* "The man eats"  
 man-ABS eat-3p

*angu-tip puisi neri-vaa* "The man eats the seal"  
 man-ERG seal-ABS eat-3p/3p

The instrumental case is versatile. It is used for the instrument with which an action is carried out, for oblique objects of intransitive verbs (also called antipassive verbs)<sup>[48][93][94]</sup> and for secondary objects of transitive verbs.<sup>[95]</sup>

*nano-q savim-mi-nik kapi-vaa* "He stabbed the bear with his knife"  
 polar bear-ABS knife-his.own-INSTR stab-3p/3p

*kaffi-sor-tar-poq* "She usually drinks coffee"  
 coffee-INSTR drink-usually-3p

*Piitaq savim-mik tuni-vara* "I gave Peter a knife"  
 Peter-ABS knife-INSTR give-I/3p

3. Kalaallisut  
 case endings

case	singular	plural
Absolutive	-q/-t/-k/-Ø	-(i)t
Ergative	-(u)p	-(i)t
Instrumental	-mik	-nik
Allative	-mut	-nut
Locative	-mi	-ni
Ablative	-mit	-nit
Prosecutive	-kkut	-tigut
Equative	-tut	-tut



It is also used to express the meaning of "give me" and for forming adverbs from nouns:

*imer-mik!* "(give me) water"  
water-INSTR

*sivisuu-mik sinip-poq* "He slept late"  
late-INSTR sleep-3p

The allative case describes movement towards something.<sup>[96]</sup>

*illu-mut* "towards the house"

It is also used with numerals and the question word *qassit* to express the time of the clock, and in the meaning "amount per unit":

*qassi-nut? – pingasu-nut.* "When?" – "At three o'clock"  
when-ALL three-ALL

*kiilu-mut tiiva krone-qar-poq* "It costs 20 crowns per kilo"  
kilo-ALL twenty crown-have-3p

The locative case describes spatial location:<sup>[96]</sup>

*illu-mi* "in the house"

The ablative case describes movement away from something or the source of something.<sup>[96]</sup>

*Rasmussi-mit allagarsi-voq* "He got a letter from Rasmus"  
Rasmus-ABL receive.letter-3p

The prosecutive case describes movement through something as well as the medium of writing or a location on the body. It is also used to describe a group of people such as a family as belonging to the modified noun.<sup>[97]</sup>

*matu-kkut iser-poq* "He entered through the door"  
door-PROS enter-3p

*su-kkut tillup-paatit?* "Where (on the body) did he hit you?"  
where-PROS hit-3p/YOU

*palasi-kkut* "the priest and his family"  
priest-PROS

The equative case describes similarity of manner or quality. It is also used for deriving language names from nouns denoting nationalities, i.e. "like a person of x nationality [speaks]".<sup>[97]</sup>

*nakorsatut sulis-sar-poq* "he works as a doctor"  
doctor-EQU work-HAB-3p

*Qallunaa-tut* "Danish language (like a Dane)"  
dane-EQU

## Possession

In Greenlandic possession is marked on the noun which agrees with the person and number of its possessor. The possessor is in the ergative case. There are different possessive paradigms for all of the different cases.<sup>[98]</sup> Table 4 gives the possessive paradigm for the absolutive case of *illu* "house". Below are given examples of the use of the possessive inflection, the use of the ergative case for possessors and the use of fourth person possessors.

4. Absolutive possessive inflection for weak nouns

Possessor	Singular	Plural
1st person Sg.	<i>illora</i> "my house"	<i>illukka</i> "my houses"
2nd person Sg.	<i>illut</i> "your house"	<i>illutit</i> "your houses"
3rd person Sg.	<i>illua</i> "his house"	<i>illui</i> "his houses"
4th person Sg.	<i>illuni</i> "his own house"	<i>illuni</i> "his own houses"
1st person Pl.	<i>illorput</i> "our house"	<i>illuvut</i> "our houses"
2nd person Pl.	<i>illorsi</i> "your (pl) house"	<i>illusi</i> "your (pl) houses"
3rd Person Pl.	<i>illuat</i> "their house"	<i>illui</i> "their houses"
4th person Pl.	<i>illortik</i> "their own house"	<i>illutik</i> "their own houses"

*Anda-p illu-a* "Anda's house"  
 Anda-ERG house-3p/POSS

*Anda-p illu-ni taku-aa* "Anda sees his own house"  
 Anda-ERG house-4p/POSS see-3p/3p

*Anda-p illu-a taku-aa* "Anda sees his (the other man's) house"  
 Anda-ERG house-3p/POSS see-3p/3p

## Vocabulary

Greenlandic vocabulary is mostly inherited from Proto-Eskimo-Aleut, but it has also taken a large number of loans from other languages, especially from Danish. Early loans from Danish have often become acculturated to the Greenlandic phonological system, for example the Greenlandic word *palasi* "priest" is a loan from the Danish "præst". But since Greenlandic has an enormous potential for the derivation of new words from existing roots, many modern concepts have Greenlandic names that have been invented rather than borrowed, e.g. *qarasaasiaq* "computer" which literally means "artificial brain". This potential for complex derivations also means that Greenlandic vocabulary is built on very few roots which combined with affixes come to form large word families.<sup>[5]</sup> For example the root for "tongue" *oqaq* is used to derive the following words:



The orthography and vocabulary of the Greenlandic language is governed by *Oqaasileriffik*, the Greenlandic language secretariat, located in the *Ilimmarfik* university campus in Nuuk.

- *oqarpoq* 'says'
- *oqaaseq* 'word'
- *oqaluppoq* 'speaks'
- *oqaasilerisoq* 'linguist'
- *oqaasilerissutit* 'grammar'
- *oqaluttualiortoq* 'author'
- *oqaasipiluuppaa* 'harangues him'
- *oqaloqatigiinneq* 'conversation'
- *oqaatiginerluppaa* 'speaks badly about him'

Lexical differences between dialects are often considerable. This is due to the earlier cultural practice of imposing taboo on words which had served as names for a deceased person. Since people were often named after everyday objects, many of these have changed their name several times because of taboo rules, causing dialectal vocabulary to diverge further.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Orthography

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Greenlandic is written with the Latin script. The alphabet:

A E F G I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V

To spell loanwords from other languages, especially from Danish and English, the additional letters *B, C, D, H, W, X, Y, Z, Æ, Ø* and *Å* are used.<sup>[99][100]</sup> Greenlandic uses the symbols "..." and »...« as quotation marks.

From 1851 until 1973, Greenlandic was written in the alphabet invented by Samuel Kleinschmidt. This alphabet employed the special character *kra* (**K'** / **κ**) which was replaced by *q* in the 1973 reform.<sup>[101]</sup> In the Kleinschmidt alphabet, long vowels and geminate consonants were indicated by means of diacritics on the vowels (in the case of consonant gemination, the diacritics were placed on the vowel preceding the affected consonant). For example, the name *Kalaallit Nunaat* was spelled *Kalâdlit Nunât*. This scheme uses a circumflex accent ( **^** ) to indicate a long vowel (e.g., *ât/ît/ût*, modern: *aat, iit, uut*), an acute accent ( **´** ) to indicate gemination of the following consonant: (i.e., *á, í, ú* modern: *a(kk), i(kk), u(kk)*) and, finally, a tilde ( **~** ) or a grave accent ( **`** ), depending on the author, indicates vowel length *and* gemination of the following consonant (e.g., *ãt, ãt, ãt* or *ât, ãt, ãt*, modern: *aatt, iitt, uutt*). The letters *ê* and *ô*, used only before *r* and *q*, are now written *ee* and *oo* in Greenlandic. The spelling system of Nunatsiavummiutut, spoken in Nunatsiavut in northeastern Labrador, is derived from the old Greenlandic system.



κ in a Greenlandic–Danish dictionary from 1926

Technically, the Kleinschmidt orthography focused upon morphology: the same derivational affix would be written in the same way in different contexts, despite its being pronounced differently in different contexts. The 1973 reform replaced this with a phonological system: Here, there was a clear link from written form to pronunciation, and the same suffix is now written differently in different contexts. The differences are due to phonological changes. It is therefore easy to go from the old orthography to the new (cf. the online converter)<sup>[102]</sup> whereas going the other direction would require a full lexical analysis.

## Sample text

*Inuit tamarmik inunngorput nammineersinnaassuseqarlutik assigiimmillu ataqqinassuseqarlutillu pisinnaatitaaffeqarlutik. Silaqassusermik tarnillu nalunngissusianik pilersugaapput, imminnullu iliorfigeqatigiittariaqaraluarput qatanngutigittut peqatigiinnerup anersaavani.*

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." (Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

## See also

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- Inuit languages
  - Inuit grammar

- Inuit phonology

## Notes

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1. According to the Namminersornerullutik Oqartussat / Grønlands Hjemmestyres (Greenlands Home, official website): « *Language. The official languages are Greenlandic and Danish... Greenlandic is the language [that is] used in schools and [that] dominates in most towns and settlements* ». "Archived copy" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20090227033842/http://uk.nanoq.gl/Emner/About/Culture.aspx>). Archived from the original (<http://uk.nanoq.gl/Emner/About/Culture.aspx>) on 2009-02-27. Retrieved 2008-12-13.
2. The uvular nasal [ŋ] is not found in all dialects and there is dialectal variability regarding its status as a phoneme (Rischel 1974:176–181)
3. ⟨ff⟩ is the way of writing the devoiced /vv/ geminate, otherwise ⟨f⟩ only occurs in loanwords.
4. /ʃ/ is found in some dialects, but not in the standard language.
5. For example the word  
*Nalunaarasuartaatilioqateeraliorfinnialikkersaatiginialikkersaatilillaranatagoorunarsuarooq*  
which means something like "Once again they tried to build a giant radio station, but it was apparently only on the drawing board"
6. Compare this with the English rate of slightly more than one morpheme per word.
7. This article uses the following abbreviations for grammatical terminology in the example glosses: IND: indicative mood; INT: intransitive; TR: transitive; ABS: Absolutive case; I: first person singular; WE: first person plural; YOU: second person; 3p: third person; 4p: reflexive/obviative person; ERG: ergative case; CONT: contemporative mood; POSS: possessor; INSTR: instrumental case; NEG: negative; INTERR: interrogative mood; IMP: imperative mood; OPT: optative mood; COND: conditional mood; CAU: causative mood; PL: plural. For affixes about which the precise meaning is the cause of discussion among specialists the suffix itself is used as gloss and its meaning must be understood from context: -SSA ( meaning either future/expectation), -NIKUU and -SIMA.
8. In glosses of examples in Greenlandic the abbreviation "3p" means "third person singular" and has the same meaning as the English third person pronouns *he*, *she* and *it*, but it does not carry any information about gender.
9. The abbreviation "4p" refers to the fourth or reflexive person.
10. For example the suffix with the shape -aa means "his/hers/its" when suffixed to a noun, but "him/her/it" when suffixed to a verb, likewise the suffix -ra either means "my" or "me" depending on whether it is suffixed on a verb or a noun.

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74. cp. Trondhjem (2009) p. 180
75. Trondhjem (2009) pp. 179–180
76. cp. Bittner (2005) p. 36
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79. Trondhjem (2009)
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## Further reading

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## External links

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- General Usage of the Greenlandic Language Papers (<https://archives-manuscripts.dartmouth.edu/repositories/2/resources/2272>) at Dartmouth College Library
- Oqaasileriffik (The Greenland Language Secretariat) (<http://www.oqaasileriffik.gl/en>) (version in English)

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